It's Not Easy to Be a Christian
John 14:18-27
May 25 - Communion

I'm disturbed. On this gentle May Sabbath I'm disturbed as I haven't been for some time. I share with you a very deep concern about the action of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church, meeting last week in San Antonio. I am disturbed by the response to those actions which I have heard from the community, from members of other Presbyterian churches and from the members of this congregation. But mostly I'm disturbed by two questions that are asked by the General Assemblies' action and the people's response: "What binds us together as Christian persons?" Does anything? Are we bound together in any way that is different from the inter-personal relationships that prevail in, say, the P. T. A.? The second question is this: "What binds us to the Church of Jesus Christ? Does anything? Is there a substantial, tangible commitment to the church?

I guess I'm disturbed because the tempest in which I found myself this week demands that those questions be confronted and answered. I operate under the assumption that what binds us to the Church is our faith in and commitment to Jesus Christ. I operate under the corollary assumption that the faith, and this commitment, is expressed in our forgiving love and loyalty to each other. I operate under the assumption that there is no earthly reason for our being here - our being a congregation - other than this faith - this love and loyalty.

The uniqueness of this faith, love and loyalty is that it either comes first in our lives, or not at all. Faith in Jesus Christ is not conditional. It depends on nothing but Him. It judges all we are, every opinion we have. every stand we take. And if it doesn't - if it does not occupy that central position where we live and move and have our being, we delude ourselves by calling it Christian FAith.

And yet the church can survive on less than that: the church can exist in society as an association of congenial people. Individuals can maintain their church relatedness with far less than that radical trust in Jesus Christ - so long as no one rocks the boat; so long as no one makes the kinds of demands on them that require giving Jesus Christ sufferance over everything else in life. It's not difficult to be a Chritian until we come upon a week like last week.

I've heard from people last week I haven't seen in, lo, these many months. I've heard people call their church a communist organization who haven't bothered to worship in it - or engage in its ministry - or support its existence. And I've heard from many responsible church members who are deeply concerned, and who have asked me to speak to the situation. I have been doing that, of course, but now I would focus on what happened and what it means. I would preface my remarks by saying that I was as surprised as you by the news releases that began last Tuesday. I have no more factual information than you; nor do I have spectacular secrets to reveal. I have the rudimentary knowledge of how these things came about,. and some opinions regarding the responsible approach to them.

The General Assembly meets once a year and is the highest judicatory of our church. It is comprised of 420 ministers and 420 elders, elected as commissioners by their Presbyterys. The General Assembly guides, directs and administers the work of the church. In addition it speaks to the church and the world in its Social Pronouncements.

Social Pronouncements are, to say the least, a very sore spot with many Presbyterians. Many believe that the church should not address itself to the world, and I would disagree strenuously with this point of view. Apparently, so do the majority of commissioners to the General Assembly. In any case, a Social Pronouncement is first drafted by the Permanent Committee on Church and Society, again a committee representing the national church and including equal numbers of clergy and laity. These people meet, several times a year, with the staff of the office of Church and Society, to study, discuss and write the first draft papers that will go to General Assembly.

At the Assembly a standing committee on Church and Society is appointed, again representing all areas of the church, this committee received the first draft proposals; studies, discusses, alters, deletes or defeats the proposed pronouncements. After all of this, the distilled product is presented to the whole assembly for approval or rejection.

Out of this process last week came a position paper on Latin America, one paragraph of which urges our government to re-establish Diplomatic Relations with Cuba and to end the eight year old trade embargo on that nation. And because of that paragraph I am preaching this sermon.

To those of you who have disagreed with what you have read in the paper I would say: let's wait until we have in our hands the full text of the Latin America position paper before we question the motives of the General Assembly. To those who feel they have reason to withdraw from the Church - or to withhold money I say: let's weigh, very carefully, the implications and effects of what we do. Frankly, I do not think it is responsible church manship to take any kind of radical action until we have been better informed than we are at this stage. To all the members of this congregation I would say, let's acknowledge the discipline of listening to what our brothers in the Lord are saying with open minds. There is nothing in the interior structure of Presbyterianism that requires obedience - as agreement with the pronouncements of the General Assembly. But when we join this church we do agree to become part of a system, and we do it seems to me, agree to be open to the ideas of our fellow church members.

There are plans now to schedule, at the earliest possible date, a forum to study and discuss the actions of the General Assembly. Let me urge those of you who are concerned to take advantage of this opportunity as well. In addition I will be more than happy to moderate a forum today - after the coffee hour for those who wish to verbalize their feelings immediately.

Finally, may I remind you that in urging Diplomatic recognition of the Cuban government the General Assembly is not, in any way, recommending that we condone or approve of Fidel Castro, or Communism. In fact, the General Assembly has recorded its unalterable opposition to Communist ideology and methodology on several occasions. But our government does maintain diplomatic relations with many Communist nations: to be precise - Russia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Rumania, Bulgaria, and Poland. Our government is, presently, in almost daily contact with the Cuban regime through the Swiss embassy. The intent, I would presume, is to keep the door of conversation open at all times, and in addition to take a new and creative initiative in waging peace with that unhappy nation.

Regarding the lifting of the trade embargo our church has spoken out of a concern for individual men and women and children who are hungry. That is all. The last Presbyterian missionary to leave Cuba, the Rev. Raymond Strong, told the General Assembly that the trade embargo has caused desperation among the Cuban people. It has also given the Communist leaders of Cuba a convenient excuse for their own inadequacies. Eight Roman Catholic Bishops in Cuba recently requested the same action "for humanitarian reasons" and the action of the General Assembly may be seen as supportive of their witness in this regard.

So much for Cuba. I would welcome your comments, your concern, your ideas.

The General Assembly also took action to channel money into and raise money for the economic improvement of minority groups in our own nation. James Forman, militant head of the new National Black Economic Development conference, who in past weeks has disrupted worship services at several large churches and taken over the offices of our Board of National Mission in New York was invited to address the Assembly. He presented the now famous "Black Manifesto". On Friday I received a special communication from the Moderator of the General Assembly to all pastors explaining what happened. I wish to share part of it with you. "This invitation in no way implied any approval of Mr. Forman's program

and methods or of the "Black Manifest" of which he is a chief mover. This manifesto obviously contains much that is impossible and much to which our Church must be unalterably opposed. But James Forman is att present the most disturbing critic of the churches from the extreme militant point of view. We need to hear him; to listen thoughtfully to him, to try to understand what he represents.

"I have received telegrams and letters protesting the bringing of Mr. Forman to San Antonio. Many have objected to the use of church money for this purpose. Those who wrote may not have recognized that the Assembly heard him not because it approved of him but because it needed him. And it would be unprecedented for a speaker to be invited to come to address the Assembly at his own expense.

"His coming makes it possible that some will misunderstand the most creative actions of this Assembly as occasioned by the demands of the "Black Manifesto" or as taken hastily in fear. The fact is that no church money is being put into funds which are under the control ofMr. Forman's group. The Assembly did what it did, through its own channels, and in its own way.

"I write this letter because much of the CHurch may be where this Assembly was seven days ago - uneasy, puzzled, unsure. We have ended in a wonderful spirit of harmony and satisfaction. I am convinced that this is nothing else than the working of the Holy Spirit in a group of earnest, seeking Christians who were gathered together in Christ's name. My prayer is that this same unity, this determination to do unusual things in an unusual way, this facing into an uncertain future in joy and trust may be characteristic of our whole church. Faithfully yours, George E. Sweazey, Moderator, 181st General Assembly."

The Church of Jesus Christ is struggling today with a matter of life and death - what is its role in the world? To what role is God calling his Church? In seeking to be a faithful communion, the Presbyterian Church has gone out on a limb many times, endangering its membership and financial strength, but only because the elected representatives of Presbyterian people have felt in their hearts that God was calling them to a new stance of discipleship.

To struggle with the role of the Church in the world is to begin with the fact that it is a new kind of world - a new situation internationally - a new set of realities domestically. The Church can decide to withdraw - to crawl into its shell and pretend that it is still 1910. Or it can thank God for the newness of the situation and engage it head on. I, for one, am a Presbyterian, because our church has consistently been alive to the world, and has tried desperately to be guided by nothing but God's call to faithful obedience. When we stop doing that; when we measure what we say and do by any other standard, I will withdraw because we will no longer have the right to call ourselves the Church of Jesus Christ.

After all, the church does have some rather specific marching orders as it seeks to be the agent of God's love in the world. And those marching orders do not contain warnings against tramping on toes, or offending political ideologies, or losing members or money.

I think the marching orders of Christian people are rather clear. Listen to this paraphrase of the prophet Isaiah, written by J. Elliot Corbett, (Prophets on Main Street, p. 66) "Have you not heard the injunction of the Lord? If thine enemy hunger, feed him. Yet there are those among you who say, 'Let them starve, and let hunger be the curse of Communism. Let us not show mercy and love, but be as cold and calculating and ruthless as the enemy. Let's win for a change! Is your memory so short? A man in Central Europe said, "Let us waste no love on Jews, spare no mercy to captured Poles. Blot out the Bible from your mind. The sword is more important than the Cross." That man wanted to win, too. His name was Hitler. No, saith the Lord, do not adopt the attitudes or ape the methods of those who hold an alien philosophy. What does it profit you, if in the struggle with your adversary, you become identical with him? You have your own ideals to promote, your own principles to uphold. It does not take fire to put out fire, but water - Living Water. Is your enemy hungry? Feed him. Does he slander? Bless. Is he hostile? Show friendship. Does he act

belligerent? Be understanding. Is his mouth full of lies? Speak the truth in love."

This is Pentecost Sunday, the day which observes the birth of the Christian Church. Actually, it was more of a jarring, disturbing experience than a birthday party. The disciples were still in Jerusalem, following the crucifixion and resurrection of their Lord. They had been hiding, waiting, perhaps planning to slip out of the city and back to their homes in Galilea. But on Pentecost something strange and powerful happened to them. The author of the Book of Acts describes it in terms of a rushing wind and tongues of fire. But the essence is that a group of frightened, disillusioned men suddenly came alive with courage and faith and commitment. Suddenly they told the story openly and the Church was born. They went on from Jerusalem to the rest of the world and eventually to death as martyrs.

That is the Holy Spirit experienced as a disturbing power that provoked men to walk away from comfort and security and into the dangerous business of discipleship. But that is not all. That same Spirit drew them together and gave them a kind of peace they had never experienced before. Jesus had promised that it would happen that way. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." (John 14:27)

That is the promise of Jesus Christ to all who would trust him and obey him - peace - the knowledge that one is acting honestly and rightly and in obedience to him - "with whom we ultimately have to do." That peace is available to you and me today, and to all who would commit themselves to Jesus Christ.

These are not easy days to be a Christian. I am reminded of the words of Abraham Lincoln - in his first inaugural address; words I think are supremely relevant; "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves."

Those are wise and relevant words. These are not easy days; the dogmas of the quiet past are not adequate to the stormy present. Let us support each other as we seek for ways to obey our Lord. Let us keep talking with each other, and disagreeing with each other, and - most of all - loving each other.

Let us begin here - at this table - at this celebration of the fact that the Risen Christ, that same Holy Spirit - is in our midst.

AMen.